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## Editorial: Digital Journalism (Studies) – Defining the Field

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# **Editorial: Digital Journalism (Studies) - Defining the Field**

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**Edson Tandoc Jr**  
**Oscar Westlund**

## **Introduction**

This special issue has been initiated and edited by the *Digital Journalism Editorial team* with three ambitious aims. First, to offer a review of research that has been published in this journal since its launch in 2013 to examine the current 'state of play'; Second, to introduce a new article format for the journal - the invited conceptual article (Westlund, 2018); and, Third, building on these articles, to outline our editorial vision of Digital Journalism Studies and the agenda of this journal going forward. The special issue features a series of invited yet double-blind peer-reviewed articles by highly regarded scholars in the field, each from different parts of the globe and representing different scholarly traditions. They serve as exemplars of the invited conceptual article format which have a target length of about 3000-4000 words and explicate a key concept relevant to digital journalism. Along with defining a concept, they also include a discussion of implications for future research and benefit to empirical research. We are immensely grateful to the contributors for rising to this challenge and producing highly reflective and clarifying articles. In this special issue, our invited authors have generated concise definitions of how they understand digital journalism that we then extrapolate in our own essay, found at the end of this issue. Ultimately this process has enabled us to provide clarity on what we mean by digital journalism studies and cement our aims and vision for the journal. We are also thankful to the three reviewers who reviewed each article for their comments, and for engaging with this new article format.

## **Digital Journalism: Past, present future**

In this issue's lead article, Steensen, Larsen, Hågvær and Fonn (2019) reviewed research publications in *Digital Journalism*, prominent book publications in the field, and the impact of this research. Steensen et. al. (2019) analysed keywords and citations across all issues of *Digital Journalism* to identify the dominant themes, degrees of diversity, interdisciplinary, as well as biases and blind spots. On such basis they conclude by offering - to some extent - an empirically based definition, from which they problematize research developments. This includes, but is not limited to, that some concepts are introduced in publications yet become little used by others. There is a tendency, for example, to ignore (often unintentionally) existing developments and concepts in the field whilst building new ways of seeing digital journalism. A more delicate approach to stitching the new with the existing is needed to balance continuity and change.

Next Zelizer offers a provocation in her essay on 'why journalism is about more than digital technology' in what is her first appearance as author in this journal. To Zelizer, the digital is not an environment, it is a modality, a stage in which journalism plays out and in which we would be served to assess not only what is changing, but what structures and practices, ideas and values continue to stay the same. In other words, how much does a term like digital necessitate a nod to technology – what are the foundations that sustain

and shape the very notion of 'journalism'? Zelizer argues that digital journalism takes its meaning from both practice and rhetoric. Its practice as newsmaking embodies a set of expectations, practices, capabilities and limitations relative to those associated with pre-digital and non-digital forms, reflecting a difference of degree rather than kind. Its rhetoric heralds the hopes and anxieties associated with sustaining the journalistic enterprise as worthwhile. Digital journalism, she contends constitutes the most recent of many conduits over time that have allowed us to imagine optimum links between journalism and the public. Zelizer highlights that the rise of networks, de-institutionalization and de-professionalization, increased participation and personal agency have all been viewed as positive to enhance democracy, but we should always consider whether some structures – hierarchical, institutional or professional might indeed be a good thing. Further, she calls for broadened discussion on transparency, from anonymity in the news to the issues present in the blurring of boundaries between fantasy and reality. Zelizer asks us to take more time to consider how news is produced and avoid what has been described elsewhere in academic literature as 'digital distraction'. Ultimately, she implores scholars to give a greater nod to history rather than a fixation on novelty, which similarly Baym (2018) has argued in her analysis of the music industries and Hamilton (2018) in examining the origins of broadcasting.

Waisbord (2019) repurposes the classic "5ws and 1H" framework for understanding digital journalism. A brief detour into the history of this time-honoured formula is perhaps pertinent to consider the balance of change and continuity that we will emphasise later in this essay. The 5ws and 1H, for example, stretches back as far as Aristotle and popularized in poetry by British writer Rudyard Kipling at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It emerged as a result of significant social and technological change and signalled a shift from stories written with a more flamboyant narrative style (see eg: Errico, 1997). It reminds us how industrialization and technology can unsettle journalism practice but that some traditional values and approaches can be re-invigorated or reinvented over time.

Waisbord salvages the "crumbling" pyramid model of news as an analytical device in his essay to assess the unprecedented developments in journalism. He highlights some of the obvious stakeholders and practices under this framework: *who* – anyone who uses the internet, *what* – content of digital journalism can be anything, *when* – shattered modern notions of time in news production and consumption and *where* – elides barriers such geography and language to reach audiences, *how* – the changing, at times, disappearing well-defined and agreed-upon norms and conventions shaping journalism practice. However it is his discussion around the *why* that offers especially profound insight for digital journalism scholarship. Here Waisbord argues the very purpose of journalism now features such a chaotic array of motivations – from issues of self-presentation to social connection and support "along with the mainstays of making money, to scrutinize and reinforce power, educate and influence" that all must be carefully considered in an environment now designed for journalism to be practiced at a constant, hyper-speed. Further, in his view, the expanding networked settings and practices of journalism require deeper consideration for the networks of digital journalism are now "far more complex, open, noisy and unruly". He draws on Peters and Witschge (2015) to suggest that while "participation in news" may not necessarily have virtuous democratic consequences, there are certainly more news producers that highlight the growing power

of platforms such as Facebook and Google. Waisbord also points to the importance of giving deeper consideration to what is socially considered and used as news.

Next, Burgess and Hurcombe draw on their expertise in digital media studies to provide an interdisciplinary perspective on digital journalism studies. They prefer to focus on the importance of the social as reference to the rise of social media or news platforms that are “born digital”. They extend the concept of social news to consider the rise of sites such as BuzzFeed, Junkee, PedestrianTV (which often promote politically progressive causes in their coverage) and directly distinguishable in the vernacular conventions and pop-culture sensibilities of social media. Burgess and Hurcombe emphasize the new genres and modes of journalistic storytelling that exploit connected digital technologies, highlighting the changing role of Twitter as a source of ‘social listening’ and as a tool to gather news tip offs or source quotes for stories. While they tend to gloss over how social media platforms may, in turn exploit mainstream journalism, they draw attention to the increasing power of packaged metrics (based on social media data) that now contribute to shaping journalistic practices, values and priorities. This leaves media institutions increasingly responsive to these metrics and hence “mirroring the priorities and values of the platforms themselves” or what Caplan and Boyd (2018) refer to as “institutional isomorphism”. Such an approach like ‘social news’ must always be careful not to subsume or overlook journalism’s relationship to broader social realms and social connections beyond digital processes, but the “transformative and isomorphic” impacts of these new platforms and practices are certainly worthy of our attention.

Robinson, Lewis and Carlson (2019) not only adopt a phrase like transformation to discuss digital journalism – they set out to develop a theoretical framework in which to understand this process. They offer a distinct contrast to Waisbord’s emphasis on the *revolutionary* changes in social and public life. To Robinson, Lewis and Carlson, transformation is a richer idea than that of change or revolution because it does not assume or equate to progress or the shedding of endemic structures. Rather it encourages a research perspective “centered on change whilst also allowing for maintenance of a foundational status quo”. Zelizer also issues caution over reference to ‘revolution’ in digital journalism studies given that “most enduring change unfolds in bits and pieces, with no technology ever staying the same for long”. Robinson et al suggest *transformation* -offers a way forward for digital journalism studies to encompass how the news media ecology is being reconstituted by mobile technology, social media and other digital platforms. The process - or myriad of practices - that shape transformation can be factored in six commitments – context sensitivity, holistic relationality, comparative inclination, normative awareness, embedded communicative power and methodological plurality. In other words, transformation becomes a framework in which to understand the balance between continuity and change. Robinson et al. positions digital journalism as a subfield of journalism studies, providing a handle for us to problematise how to situate digital journalism scholarship which we shall discuss shortly. Their approach to transformation certainly complements

Duffy and Ang highlight - as do all of our authors in this issue - the difficulty in disentangling journalism from digital technology. In an approach similar to Steensen et al, they draw on keywords from articles in *Digital Journalism* to reveal a persistent newsroom-first approach (see also Wahl Jorgensen, 2009) that tend to emphasise how digitisation brings opportunities to journalism that have not been realised or explore a

recurring theme of boundary work. Instead, they suggest digital journalism studies should lose the normative accretions surrounding journalism and begin with the principles of digitisation. They balance a more direct, yet broader societal approach to calling for scholarship that privileges the 'digital' over 'journalism'. As a result, digital journalism becomes the embodiment of digital principles - "Digitisation sets the agenda for journalism to follow, rather than journalism setting the agenda for its digital incarnation to live up to - or not". By digitalisation, they draw on the scholarship of Brennan and Kreiss (2016) to refer to the way domains of social life are restructured around digital communication and media infrastructures. A shift in this direction, they suggest requires a greater distance from legacy news production and the newsroom to explore how digitisation is a feature of society and how journalism articulates or informs this.

### **Towards a revised editorial agenda**

These conceptual articles crystallise the different perspectives and approaches to digital journalism that - when read as a collection - reveal the synergies, provocations and clear epistemological differences influencing research in this space. In the final essay, we advance these ideas further by refining and defining what we mean by digital journalism studies (Eldridge, Hess, Tandoc and Westlund, 2019) to offer some clarity for researchers in the field, whilst embracing the diversity of ideas and ways of connecting the digital with journalism. Our central concern is to lay the foundations for digital journalism as existing within its own distinctive field, that is, moving beyond its place as a sub-field of journalism studies. In the concluding article of this special issue, we present what we term the 'Digital Journalism Studies Compass' (DJSC) to provide clarity around the directions we envision this journal adopting into the future - embracing the digital with journalism, continuity and change. It is our hope that scholars will be able to adopt this heuristic tool when they too are navigating the digital journalism space as part of their own scholarly pursuits, and that it will help enrich discussions in this exciting scholarly terrain.

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